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## RUPTURES AND RIPPLE EFFECTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

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# The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster: Disparities in Perceptions, Aspirations, and Behaviour in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey

Dawn Chatty

**Abstract** Humanitarian assistance coupled with an unsustainable policy of regional containment have only created greater poverty and misery for Syrians fleeing civil war. How this has been allowed to happen on the southern shores of the Mediterranean – where extraordinary social linkages and networks have existed for centuries – lies mainly in the disparities between perceptions, aspirations and behaviour among refugees, practitioners and policymakers in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. This article highlights in particular three such disconnects: the ahistorical approach to engaging with displaced people in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, which has led to the implementation of international blueprints of humanitarian support that are disconnected from people's needs; the imposition of an encampment policy at odds with displaced people's need for temporary settlement enabled through their own social networks; the redundancy of humanitarian practitioners' background and experience in dealing with the particularities of displaced populations in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the failure to build on practices that work.

## 1 From a refuge state to a Syrian mass exodus

In the 100 years between 1850 and 1950 Syria received several million forced migrants from the contested borderlands between the Imperial Russian and Ottoman Empires. Following three Ottoman-Russian wars between the 1850s and 1880s, more than 3 million forced migrants from Crimea, the Caucasus and the Balkans entered the Ottoman provinces of Anatolia; many continued on their journeys to the Arab regions of Greater Syria. The Ottoman administration established a special commission to address the needs of these forcibly displaced Tatars, Circassians, Chechnyans, Abkhaza, Abaza, and other related ethnic groups.

This 'Refugee Commission' – the first of its kind in contemporary Western history – offered incoming forced migrants agricultural land, draught animals, seeds, and other support in the form of tax relief for

a decade, and exemptions from military service (Chatty 2010). Every effort was made to help these settlers become self-sufficient in as short a time as possible. The administration encouraged integration into numerous ethnically mixed settlements of Greater Syria to promote and preserve the cosmopolitan and convivial nature of urban and rural communities in the late Ottoman Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Hamid II and his subjects came to regard providing refuge as not only a social and compassionate gesture, but also a religious and moral duty (Chatty 2013).

Then, as the First World War drew to a close, as many as half a million Armenian Christians found refuge in Syria, settling among their co-religionists in Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut. When the modern Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, 10,000 Kurds from Turkey fled across the border into Syria, choosing to escape from the forced secularism of Kemal Atatürk's new Turkey. The inter-war French mandate over Syria saw a continuation of these processes, with waves of Assyrian Christians entering the country in the 1930s, seeking asylum and safety from conditions in Iraq when Great Britain returned its mandate to the League of Nations,<sup>1</sup> having failed to secure peace and security in the country on its own terms.

All these forced migrants were granted citizenship in the new Syrian state. And then in the late 1940s, Syria became a safe haven for over 100,000 Palestinians fleeing the *Nakba*, which was concurrent with the creation of the state of Israel. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the population of the modern Syrian state provided refuge for hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ethno-religious minorities uprooted from their homelands. Consequently, strong social and economic ties were maintained broadly within the region and throughout the Balkans, Eastern Europe and borderlands with Russia.

A decade into the twenty-first century, Syria has disintegrated into extreme violence, which has triggered a displacement crisis of massive proportions. The speed at which Syria has been emptied of nearly 20 per cent of its population has shocked the world and left the humanitarian aid regime in turmoil as agencies struggle to respond to the growing displacement crisis on its borders.

Each state bordering Syria has responded differently to this complex emergency: Turkey rushed to set up its own refugee camps for the most vulnerable groups, but generally supported people finding their own way and 'self-settling' in rural areas and urban centres; Lebanon refused to allow international humanitarian aid agencies to set up formal refugee camps, assuming that the Syrians would self-settle among 'kith and kin' or use social and economic contacts to find refuge; and Jordan prevaricated for nearly a year, before insisting on the establishment of a massive United Nations (UN) refugee camp in the desert borderland between the two countries. To be fair, all the states neighbouring Syria assumed this would be a short crisis, with the Syrians' return likely in months rather than years.

Turkey and Lebanon initially permitted Syrians to enter as temporary 'guests'. Lebanon closed this door in 2015, while Turkey has continued to allow Syrians to enter the country. Jordan hoped to contain the flow of people seeking refuge far from any urban centre and has insisted that all Syrians that the security services intercept crossing the border must go to the UN refugee border camp at Za'tari. Failing in that it has returned some categories of people fleeing from Syria (specifically, Palestinian refugees from Syria), contrary to international legal principles of non-refoulement.<sup>2</sup>

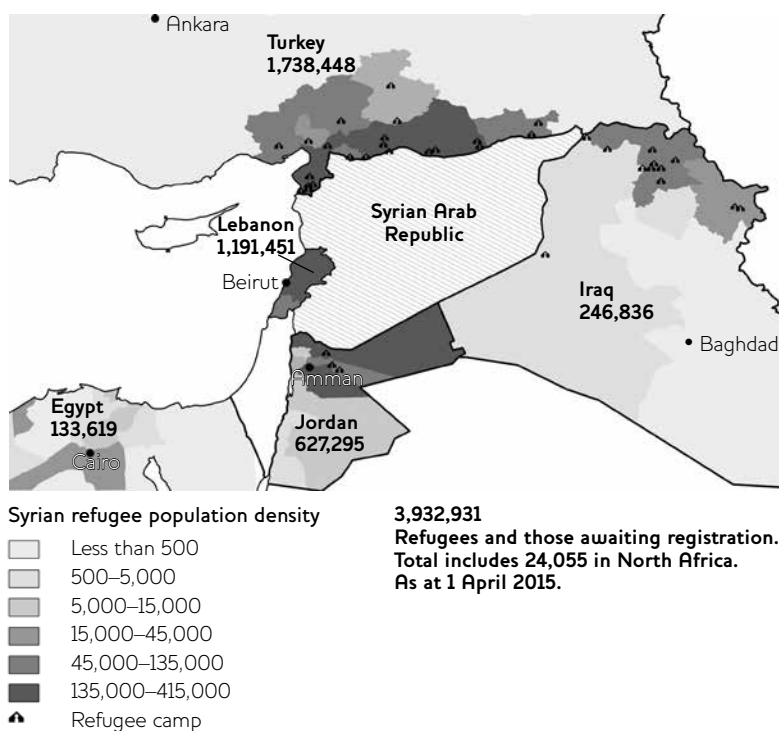
Lebanon and Jordan have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention that sets out principles and responsibilities of states in providing protection and asylum for those deemed to fit the definition of 'refugee' according to the 1951 Statutes and the 1967 Protocol. And although Turkey has signed the 1951 Convention, it has reserved its interpretation of it to apply only to Europeans who are seeking refuge or asylum in Turkey. Hence, refuge in the region is not 'rights based', but rather is at the mercy of local cultural notions (institutions) of hospitality and duties of generosity. These customs are known – over time – to also raise parallel notions of hostility and parsimony. Hospitality at either individual or state level is never open-ended.

According to UN estimates, over 70 per cent of Syrian refugees who cross international borders self-settle in cities, towns and villages where they have long-established social networks. Many refuse to register as refugees and so are 'invisible' to aid agencies. This population is not served by the international humanitarian aid regime, which is focused almost entirely on the camps the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) set up in Jordan, and on the larger informal settlements in Lebanon; in particular, the Bekaa Valley where the majority of Syrians previously worked as seasonal agricultural labourers.

The UN does not run any refugee camps in Turkey, although it provides some support through partner agencies such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme. This is in part political. Previous crises in the region have been managed through government structures and without setting up refugee camps. For example, with the Iraqi crisis in Syria, the Syrian government insisted that all international aid came through government channels – and not through the few non-governmental organisations (NGOs) permitted to operate in the country – and was used for Syrians and Iraqis alike. Given that Iraqis refused to go into refugee camps – and the Syrian regime did not want to set any up – UNHCR was forced to deal with self-settled refugees and members of their hosting communities on an equal basis, which it did well. However, subsequently that has not been the case with Jordan, which insisted on setting up camps for Syrians – and handing over their administration to UNHCR – fearing that otherwise Syrians would self-settle around the country.

In Turkey, most refugees are clustered in the southern region of the country, including the Hatay, which borders Syria. Some 25–30 per cent

Figure 1 Syrian refugee density and camps in neighbouring host countries



Source Redrawn from <http://data.unhcr.org>.

of the Syrian refugee flow into Turkey is directed into camps. The general management of these Turkish government camps is such that a waiting list exists for refugees who wish to avail themselves of the five-star service that is reputed to be on offer. In Lebanon, informal settlements – often based on pre-existing relationships and ‘gang master’ (*shawish*) agricultural hierarchies – are proliferating, with accompanying patron–client relationships overshadowing more participatory and transparent management of humanitarian aid. In Jordan, self-settled refugees from Syria are increasingly looking for work as they exhaust their savings. Those that the Jordanian security services find to be working illegally are deported to Syria or sent to the UN-managed refugee camps at Za’tari or Azraq, from which there is no escape other than paying to be ‘sponsored’ by a Jordanian, or smuggled out, re-entering the liminal state of irregular status.

## 2 Mass influx, regionally contained?

Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan have each established a variety of temporary measures to deal with the crisis. However, in no case have displaced people or host communities been consulted. Discrepancies are rapidly becoming visible and tensions and protests have emerged among host communities, displaced Syrians and humanitarian policymakers. Humanitarian assistance templates created in other regions of the world during waves of crises in the six decades that UNHCR has been operating have not been well received in the region.

Angry demonstrations in Jordan against rules and operating practices in Za'tari camp in 2012 led staff to restrict tent distribution until it was dark, to disperse extended families widely around the massive camp and hence reduce the level of protest. In fact, UN camps have been rejected outright by the majority of the Syrians fleeing the armed conflict, as well as by several neighbouring states.

As time passes and savings are used up, many of these Syrians face impoverishment. Their added immobility and lack of local alternatives are rapidly creating an unsustainable situation that threatens to test the West's preferred 'solution' of regionally containing the crisis. Without significant changes in policy and practice throughout the region, larger numbers of Syria's forced migrants will shortly leave the region in search of protection – albeit temporary – elsewhere. Unable to work or provide their children with an education, they will risk their lives in dangerous sea crossings and exhausting land marches led by people smugglers.

### **3 Research questions**

This study sets out to understand the disparity in perceptions, aspirations, and behaviour of refugees from Syria, members of host communities, and practitioners in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. It also seeks to identify what measures, if any, are regarded as important by the three target communities for return and reintegration in Syria when conditions permit.

#### **3.1 Methodology and methods**

The study is based on a multi-site, 12-month qualitative and participatory study, which was conducted between October 2014 and September 2015 in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and in English, and interpretation was only required in Turkey when interviewing members of local communities that were hosting refugees from Syria. After selecting initial key informants using a purposive sampling approach, a snowballing technique was used to identify further participants for interview,<sup>3</sup> paying attention to representativeness in terms of gender, class, education, ethnicity and origin. A qualitative and interpretive approach, alongside a participant observation strategy, also defined this study.

The study initiated a consultative engagement between practitioners, representatives of hosting communities and the refugees themselves. It began with in-country recruitment of researchers in collaboration with the facilitating research institutions: the Swedish Institute of Istanbul in Turkey, American University of Beirut in Lebanon, and Council for British Research in the Levant in Jordan. Fieldwork was divided into three phases in each country, each phase one month long: October 2014 in Istanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep, Turkey; December 2014 in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon; and February 2015 in Amman and Irbid, Jordan. Each field trip included exploratory informal and focused discussions, as well as semi-structured interviews with national and international practitioners, self-settled refugees and host community members, as well as refugees in camps.

## 4 A precarious containment policy and its implications

### 4.1 Lebanon

Many Syrians in Lebanon who have been displaced by the conflict in Syria do not feel that they are refugees. However, they sense a growing level of social discrimination, especially in Beirut. In addition, they expressed their fear that the Lebanese associate them with a rise in criminality. Many of the Syrians in Lebanon were not new to the country, but had been working there for many years in the construction and agriculture sectors. The conflict in Syria means that many of these workers' wives and children have fled Syria to join men who have been working in Lebanon for some time. They have largely made their journeys in stages, first arriving in Akkar or the Wadi Khalid region in north Lebanon and gradually making their way to join their spouses in the Bekaa Valley, Tripoli and Beirut. Syrian workers fear losing their jobs once it becomes known that their families have joined them, and this contributes to the fear, distress, and isolation many experience.

My husband came to Lebanon a long time ago, even before the war in Syria. He has been coming over since he was 17, therefore he knows Lebanon very well. He used come and go, stay for a while [working as a carpenter] and then go back to Syria. In 2011 he was in Lebanon; then the situation was very bad in Syria, so I came to Lebanon... my husband had a job and we stayed at his boss's house. Back then I couldn't go back to Hama. My husband had no intention of bringing me to Lebanon, for him it was settled that he worked in Lebanon and I stayed in Syria. But after all the explosions in Hama, I couldn't protect my kids. I decided to come and stay in Lebanon. My husband is always afraid he might be fired [if the children get into any trouble] (Reem, Beirut, 2014).

Arbitrary curfews – illegal under national and international law – in over 40 municipalities have meant that many Syrians are afraid to go out at night, work overtime or mix in any way with the Lebanese population. For many skilled and unskilled Syrians in Lebanon, the curfews have meant that older children and adolescents are taken out of school to work during daylight hours with their fathers.

My son should be in ninth grade, but he works in a supermarket now. But people tell me that it is a waste that my son is not in school. He will have no future without education. But our situation is very bad, I really want to send him to school, but at the same time we are in deep need and of his financial help (Layla, Beirut, 2014).

In the Bekaa Valley, Syrians who have no savings work for very low wages to provide their families with food. This has created hostility among local Lebanese who see Syrian workers as a threat to their own livelihoods, which has resulted in increased social discrimination and vigilantism.

Many Syrians, despite their long association with Lebanon over decades and often close kinship ties, feel frightened and cut off from Lebanese



society. Although a number of international and national and local NGOs operate in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley to provide basic needs, there is little interaction with Lebanese host communities. Very little evidence emerged from the interviews of host community involvement in any ‘survival in dignity’<sup>4</sup> activity on an individual basis; NGO activity was limited to more ‘distant and distancing’ charity work or local civil-society efforts in Beirut that middle-class Lebanese and Syrians resident in the country organised.

UNHCR’s very slow response in providing cash assistance to the most needy and vulnerable Syrians in Lebanon has led to large numbers of women and children begging in Beirut, something that Lebanese generally scorn and regard with little sympathy. UNHCR has expressed concern over the rise in begging and has identified it as a ‘negative coping strategy’, but UN agencies have made little effort to understand how this could be altered through changes in humanitarian policy and practice. Many refugees have exhausted their savings and have no opportunities to work. Thus, street begging, which is preferred to asking for charity, becomes the only way for people to feed their families.

The consociational<sup>5</sup> shape of government in Lebanon, and the long period during the crisis when there was in effect ‘no government’, led to a period of paralysis in the UN humanitarian aid system. Thus, effective relief programmes for the poorest and most vulnerable Syrians – such as cash transfers – were very late in getting started, which resulted in an exponential rise in begging and other negative coping strategies (for example taking young children out of school to work, moving into buildings unfit for human habitation, and relying on former agricultural gang masters to be the interface between the UN humanitarian relief system and refugees themselves).

All these factors, with the close ties and often extended family networks among the very poor across the two countries, have led to significant social discrimination and an unwillingness or inability – at local level – to help Syrians with basic health and education needs. The lack of education opportunities for nearly 50 per cent of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon weighs heavily on their families. Some may pick a young family member to be smuggled out of the region where employment or education may be possible.

#### **4.2 Jordan**

Most Syrians regard Jordan’s initial response to the humanitarian crisis and mass influx of people from the Der’aa region of Syria into the country as open and generous. Most of these Syrians had kinship ties in northern Jordan or well-established social networks, and the hosting of this initial influx was regarded as hospitable. However, over time the Jordanian government has restricted access to the country and actively prevented some from entering (e.g. young single men) and returned others (e.g. Palestinian refugees from Syria).

At the beginning you had a refugee crisis with a security component and it has become a security crisis with a refugee component. So in the early days it was 'these are our brothers' and so the natural generosity has now give way to more suspicion about who these people are and the security card is played all the time now (Senior international practitioner, Amman, 2015).

A discrepancy has emerged between what local media widely report – that Syrians are a burden on the Jordanian economy – and what policymakers and practitioners feel is actually occurring. The host community in Jordan is bombarded with information about the negative influence of Syrian refugees in the country, but studies are emerging that do not back this up. Many policymakers believe that Syrians contribute far more to the Jordanian economy than is reported or spoken of in society. Some point to an International Labour Organization report<sup>6</sup> that suggested that unemployment of Jordanians had not risen since the start of the Syrian crisis, but actually dropped somewhat following the opening of 200 Syrian-owned factories, which employed an estimated 6,000 Jordanians.

Syrian refugees are skilled craftsmen, especially carpenters, we all know that. Jordanians are not skilled carpenters. Syrians are not taking jobs from Jordanians; but they may be taking jobs from Egyptians. They are working informally, but that puts a lot of stress on them because they can be arrested and deported if they are found out (Senior Jordanian policymaker, Amman 2015).

Some social discrimination is aimed at Syrians in Jordan, but it is muted compared with that in Lebanon. Jordanians are quieter about negative social attitudes they may hold. This may be associated with tribal custom and general conceptual concerns related to the social requirement to show hospitality to strangers.

However, Jordanian sensitivity to the presence of Palestinian refugees from Syria has led to draconian surveillance to identify such refugees, a dragnet that often pulls in non-Palestinian refugees from Syria. Those found to be working illegally are either deported across the border – if Palestinian refugees from Syria – or sent to the Azraq or Za'tari camps, which creates greater mistrust and suspicion of the host government among refugees.

Jordanians generally recognise that their country benefits from international aid from for refugees and that a significant percentage goes into direct government projects to assist Jordanians; for example, between 2016–19 a joint US-Jordanian project will spend US\$1bn on infrastructure development and the construction of 50 high schools for Jordanians. But despite the growing recognition of the contribution refugees in Jordan make to the economy, this is not being translated into policy changes.

Many Syrians feel pushed into either working illegally and facing deportation if caught, or making the decision to leave Jordan.

Education opportunities for refugees are limited, and many Syrian children can only attend second-shift schools with inferior curricula and reduced hours. Some Syrians consider the situation in Jordan so dire that they are preparing to return to Syria rather than live in what they consider 'inhuman conditions' any longer. According to Andrew Harper, a senior UNHCR humanitarian aid practitioner in Jordan, by September 2015 at some points nearly 200 Syrians a day were returning to Syria (Naylor and Luck 2015). Many travel through Syria to Turkey in the hope of finding a way to Europe where they might be able to work, send remittances to their families and educate their children.

#### 4.3 Turkey

Syrians in Turkey come from a variety of backgrounds and social classes. Many Syrians are concerned with the negative images of 'dirty' and 'uncouth' Arabs that middle-class Turks commonly express. Furthermore, Syrians have remarked that many Turkish observers have difficulty differentiating between the general Syrian refugee population and the *nawaar* (Gypsies).<sup>7</sup> The Syrian crisis has displaced Gypsy communities in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, and they are commonly seen begging on the streets of Istanbul and elsewhere. Largely unrecognised, the armed conflicts in Iraq and Syria have disrupted the peripatetic and seasonal economy of the Gypsies of south-west Asia, who have gravitated to Turkey for its greater security.

Recognition of the needs of Syrian refugees was widespread among members of host Turkish communities. But they and Syrian refugees themselves widely condemned begging. In the words of one interviewee: 'I don't like to give money to beggars because it just encourages them' (Turkish practitioner, Istanbul, 2014).

Lack of communication and poor understanding of the situation of Syrians led to demonstrations, arrests and the deaths of around a dozen Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees in October 2014. Many Turkish citizens felt that greater transparency on the part of the government over what Syrians were entitled to would have relieved a critical situation and the growing discrimination. Many thought that the government was giving Syrian refugees salaries; others felt that Syrians worked for lower wages – their Turkish employers did not have to pay taxes because the Syrians were not 'on the books' – and this was driving out unskilled Turkish workers, who had no safety net when they lost their jobs to Syrians.

Widespread support in the third sector was especially noticeable among established NGOs, and Sufi-based civil-society organisations, rather than religious ones, which mainly provided hot meals and community-supported accommodation. In Istanbul as well as Gaziantep, it was common for neighbourhood public kitchens to provide free meals and bread to the poor, as well as refugees living in the area.

My husband came first and then I joined him eight months later with our baby. At first we went to Mersin, but my husband couldn't find

a job. When we ran out of money we came to Gaziantep, because the Syrian Interim Government was here. We figured there would be more jobs here. So we came here and two months later we met this nice man who found a job for my husband and rented us these two rooms. Our neighbours gave us some mattresses and a TV to watch Syrian television. There is also a mosque nearby where I go and the people there give me diapers [nappies] for the baby, bread and daily hot meals, as well as supplies of sugar, pasta and oil (Hala, Gaziantep, 2014).

Lack of a common language may have divided people at other times, but in the present crisis language seems to be less significant. For unskilled work, which is largely what Syrians are engaging in, language is not a barrier. Professionals and skilled workers, however, have found that it is not language but accreditation that is a barrier to working. Many have been unable to practise their professions, in particular doctors and health-care specialists until they have proved that they qualified outside Syria. But in other cases, being *very* different seems to have bred greater sympathy and general support at the local community level.

In Turkey, lessons learned have been more widely implemented in response to critical events, such as the October 2014 demonstrations and criticism of the government's lack of transparency. According to an International Crisis Group report in April 2013, international experts had described the camps that Turkish emergency relief organisation IFAD has set up since in 2012 – without the assistance of UN experts or their camp templates – as 'five-star'.<sup>8</sup> These settlements are open and refugees may enter and leave on a daily basis. Absences of more than three weeks at a time are not tolerated, however, because of the long waiting list of Syrian refugees.

Interviews in Turkey took place before the government in January 2015 announced a law to issue Syrians with formal identity cards and provide temporary protection, including rights to health and education opportunities and permission to apply for work permits. But it was clear that Turkey was far more humane and practical in its approach to the mass influx of Syrian refugees than Jordan or Lebanon, and social discrimination was at its lowest; and this despite a language barrier that does not exist in Lebanon or Jordan.

Members of Sufi-based organisations said that it was a religious and ethical duty to provide refuge for Syrians in their country. Much of their activity has permitted a form of local accommodation in Turkey, which has not happened in Lebanon or Jordan, despite the closer linguistic and social ties. Social cohesion has been strong, which bodes well in the event of the local integration of Syrians in Turkey, or as a friendly and supportive neighbouring state if refugees ultimately return home, depending on the political solution that finally emerges.

## **5 Disconnects, redundant development models and ripple effects**

The disparity in perceptions among refugees, members of local hosting communities and practitioners is especially pronounced in Lebanon and Jordan, where the international humanitarian aid regime is the most active.

### **5.1 Humanitarian practitioners and the Syrian refugee population profile**

Many young international staff have no experience of the region, some coming, for example, from a single previous assignment in Africa. The cosmopolitan nature and generally high levels of education and skills of many of the Syrians they encounter come as a surprise. The engagement of UN humanitarian frameworks – an architecture of assistance – is built on templates developed over the past four decades, largely among agrarian and poor developing countries. Thus the populations these young international practitioners are used to dealing with tend to be largely uneducated and unskilled. Treating them as powerless victims of a catastrophe and setting out the rules for receiving assistance generally goes unchallenged.

Such policy and practice does not fit easily into the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean among a refugee population that is largely educated and middle class, and people determined to maintain their agency, who prefer, for example, to receive cash assistance, rather than food aid. The disbelief with which young international aid workers respond on learning that Syrian refugees are selling their food parcels, and the aid workers' perception of 'ingratitude', can only be explained in terms of this cultural misunderstanding. They expect refugees to be passive recipients of aid, and when they are not the aid workers respond negatively towards their efforts to do what they know is best for their families. Without a serious effort to make humanitarian 'solutions' fit the Middle Eastern context, success will continue to be muted at best and damaging at worst.

### **5.2 Temporary protection, not resettlement**

It has become clear to most humanitarian aid workers that that self-settlement is emerging as preferable to encampment. Encampment was seen as creating conditions for local accommodation, and potentially a return and re-integration into Syria's many social communities. Lessons learned from Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992–95 war support this position (Blitz 2015), when large numbers of Bosnians were offered protection in Europe, and were widely dispersed among local communities rather than being enclosed in refugee camps until the crisis was resolved. Self-settlement and dispersal throughout Europe on a temporary basis – until conditions for return were right – meant that more countries stepped forward to take this temporary population. The UK alone took over 75,000 Bosnians in one year and dispersed them across its cities.

There is a need for local community drop-in centres in the region that offer opportunities for non-formal education and technical training. Practitioners and refugees regularly suggested skills development,

psycho-social support and language instruction as measures to help local accommodation and provide a lost generation of young people with a future. Policymakers and humanitarian aid practitioners referred to lessons learned from the practice of setting up drop-in centres in Syria for Iraqi refugees as exemplary (Chatty and Mansour 2012). Opportunities for education for young Syrian refugees have not been made widely available, despite numerous studies pointing to gaps, all of which has left the UN slogan 'No lost generation' no more than that: just a slogan.

Temporary protection, not resettlement, is the main aspiration for those who have been forced to flee Syria: to be able to work and educate their young people until they can eventually return to Syria. The temporary protection afforded to nearly 1.2 million Bosnians in Europe in a time of crisis is an example of what the European states can do if they have the will.

### 5.3 What are the alternatives?

It is noteworthy that Turkey, which has not requested assistance from UNHCR, seems to have managed the process of providing assistance without undermining refugee agency and dignity. Largely working alone, with local staff drawn from the civil service, as well as the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority of the Prime Minister's Office (AFAD) and the main quasi-official Turkish NGO IHH, Turkey has managed the Syrian refugee crisis with sensitivity and concern.

The separate social and political and migration histories of the populations in Turkey and the countries of the Levant have obviously contributed to the disparities in perceptions, aspirations and behaviour among refugees, host community members and practitioners in each of the three countries. If humanitarian policy's starting point was to appreciate which displaced populations have relocated to which parts of the Middle East since the 1850s, policymakers and practitioners would understand to some extent the nature of population movements from Syria today, as different groups seek to move to where members of their communities have relocated, and capitalise on these ties to survive.

That the Turkish government has refused to allow the UNHCR to have a significant or major role in Turkey, which is not the case in Lebanon and Jordan, has also contributed to some of the disparities noted in this study. Whereas Turkey maintained a locally developed response to emergencies through its own national management of refugee camps for Syrians, Lebanon and Jordan could not and thus faced having to accept or reject the internationally developed humanitarian aid template UNHCR proposed.

Global templates for humanitarian assistance, built on experiences in very different contexts and among populations of significantly different make-up, are not easily integrated into Middle Eastern concepts of refuge, hospitality and charity. The close social ties and networks of Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan, but not in Turkey (with the exception of the Hatay), have meant that the initial generosity of relatives hosting

refugees in a wide social network has more rapidly given way to hostility and discrimination, unlike the situation in Turkey where fewer Syrians had social networks and hosts accepted them based on a religious and ethical sense of duty to look after strangers.

Although Syrians, historically, have accepted wave after wave of forced migrants from the Balkans, the Caucasus and Eastern Anatolia, they have no experience of creating camps. Most of the several million forced migrants who entered Syria between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries were encouraged to self-settle and disperse themselves throughout the country, relying on social ties, faith-based charity – particularly from Christian and Sufi associations – and support, in the first instance. Encampment was rejected in favour of small-scale, local assistance and refuge. This aversion to encampment was also fed by the profoundly disturbing example of numerous Palestinian refugee camps, which the UN set up in their midst over the course of more than six decades.

## **6 Final reflections**

Across the board, what emerges is that history matters and that humanitarian templates created in other parts of the world cannot simply be laid down in this complex ethno-religious, middle-income region of the world.

Historically, Syria has been a haven for displaced people fleeing wars between the Imperial Russian and Ottoman Empires, for Armenian refugees following the First World War, then Kurds, Assyrian Christians and later Palestinians. It is ironic that Syria should now be experiencing a mass exodus of its own population, seeking refuge beyond the country's borders.

Many of the differences in attitudes and perceptions described in this article can be linked to Syria's historic social ties and political relations with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In addition, the disparity in perceptions among policymakers, practitioners and host communities is widespread, but not equally so in the three countries. Many refugees and practitioners described steps that the UN and other international organisations could take to improve conditions, halt a potential mass exodus from the region, and create conditions on the ground for future return and reintegration in Syria.

The present situation is unsustainable. Lebanon and Jordan, and even Turkey, cannot cope with such high numbers of refugees – currently over 3 million – for much longer; international assistance is insufficient to provide refugees with survival in dignity; and local social networks, as well as local organisations, cannot afford to help feed and clothe larger numbers without support. For example, if the UK were to take the same number of refugees relative to its population as Lebanon, it would accept at least 20 million refugees from Syria (instead of the 20,000 that the government proposes to take over the next four years).

Without a dramatic change in international humanitarian aid policy and programming people will resort to mass flight from the region, by any

means necessary, to secure survival in dignity (the opportunity to work to feed and educate their families until they can return to Syria), which they cannot access in the region. The Russian bombing campaign against opposition forces and the Islamic State (IS), alongside the Syrian regime's barrel-bombing of civilians and IS gains in the countryside, are leading to greater outflows of Syrians, many of them going directly to Europe.

The danger continues to be that as long as the discrepancies in perceptions and aspirations among refugees, humanitarian practitioners and policymakers in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are not addressed, more Syrians will risk their lives making irregular movements to Europe in search of survival with dignity.

### Notes

- 1 The League of Nations was founded in 1920 shortly after the First World War as an intergovernmental organisation committed to maintaining world peace.
- 2 The return of alleged refugees to their states of origin is commonly referred to as *refoulement*. International treaties explicitly prohibit this practice; for example, Article 33 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.
- 3 Interviewees' names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.
- 4 UNHCR uses the phrase 'survival in dignity' to mean being able to access basic necessities such as food, shelter and education for children.
- 5 Consociationalism is a stable democratic system in deeply divided societies that is based on power-sharing between elites from different social groups. In Lebanon it occurs between numerous ethno-religious communities.
- 6 See [www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS\\_242021/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_242021/lang-en/index.htm)
- 7 Also referred to as Romani, Rom and Dom.
- 8 See [www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/225-blurring-the-borders-syrian-spillover-risks-for-turkey.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/225-blurring-the-borders-syrian-spillover-risks-for-turkey.pdf)

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